## CHAPTER 4 CHARACTER AND IDENTITY

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Reading's urban form maintains the traditional New England village structure, with a distinct center, family-oriented residential neighborhoods, few business corridors and a surrounding system of natural elements.

Reading has a long history of change and growth. It has evolved from an outlying and isolated collection of subsistence farms, to a specialized farming community centered around a village center, to a minor center for the manufacture of every-day commodities, and to a residential suburb. Throughout this evolution it has managed to retain a sense as a distinct place.

Reading is perceived by its citizens as a low-to-moderate-density, single-family suburban residential community, into which business, industrial, and multi-family land uses should fit without disruption. New development or redevelopment is judged principally on its ability to conform harmoniously to residential values. The Town is seen as a destination community, to which families from elsewhere strive to be able to live and in which families already residing expect to be able to remain. Thus, the upholding of a quiet, family-oriented lifestyle, with supportive community services, is held to be of great value.

The extent to which the Town's physical environment is consistent with these values is held to be critically important: well-maintained homes, shade trees, lawns, private yards, safe streets without noise and dangers from traffic, and freedom from impingement from non-residential users; a daily refuge from the pressures, impersonality, and uncertainties of modern urban life. The image of Reading as a peaceable, family-oriented, single-family suburban residential community remains a powerful, self-defining ideal, against which the Town's citizens judge the quality of real conditions in the Town and the nature of changes to it.

#### 4.2 ANALYSIS

During the last decade, the housing cost increase in the Boston Region has reached such proportions that it has begun to affect Reading's New England village character and community identity in mainly two ways:

- In building/expanding to larger houses for smaller households
- In absorbing housing developments of high density

The first comes as a general tendency to expand their homes for a variety of reasons. The second is a consequence of the lack of affordable units for low- and medium-incomes, thus allowing unplanned, state mandated, high-density comprehensive permits to occur in tandem with real estate market demand. Both tendencies impact the diversity and scale of the housing stock to the detriment of the Town's traditional character and identity.

### **FINDING**

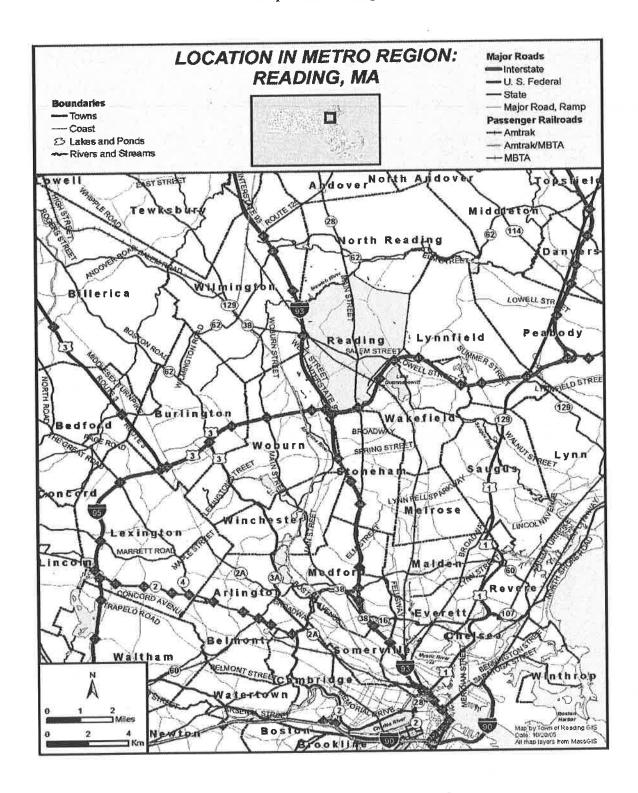
Reading's urban form maintains the traditional New England village structure, with a distinct center, family-oriented residential neighborhoods, few business corridors and a surrounding system of natural elements.

The character and identity of the community, preserved up to today, is potentially threatened by changes occurring within the existing fabric; changes driven by forces outside the realm of the Town's influence and sustained by the regional housing crisis. The human-friendly balance among building size, lot size and natural elements that exists throughout the Town is put to test by factors external to Reading, thus threatening the sense of distinctiveness maintained throughout the years.

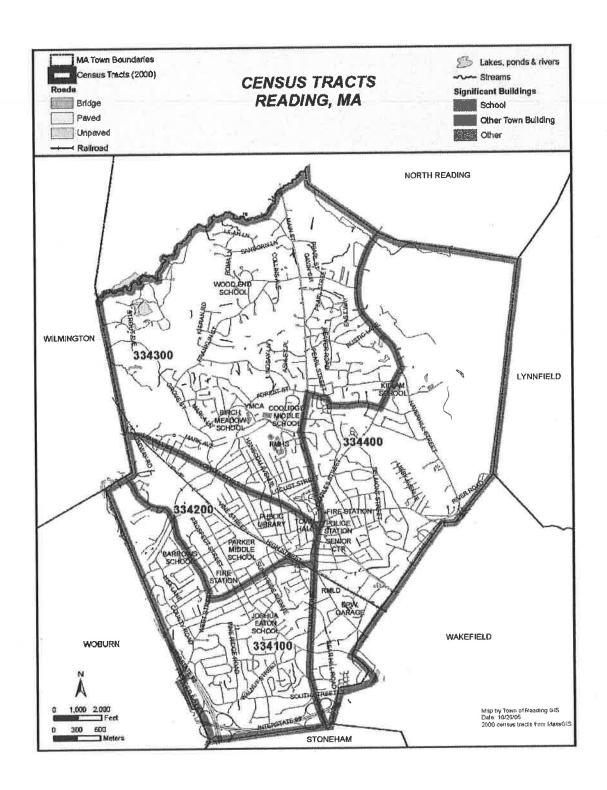
During the last 10-15 years, Reading's relationship to its adjacent communities and to the Region as a whole has increased in complexity. Policy and planning in topics such as sustainability, smart growth, allocation of resources and large project consensus do show a relationship between local and regional scale. This condition is a consequence of growth issues within the "part" (each municipality) and growth of the "whole" (the region) being interconnected, as witnessed in many communities throughout the Boston Region and other metropolitan areas in the country.

Given Reading's limited municipal resources, the effort required to sustain the Town's presence in inter-municipal and regional activities needs to be carefully prioritized and efficiently programmed. In this way, the Town's interests can be protected in the short- and long-range, as demonstrated since 2002 by the I93-I95 Interchange Planning Initiative.

Map 7 Locus Map



Map 8 U.S. Census Tracts



In the subsequent chapters of this Master Plan, the significance of planning ahead is emphasized in many areas, such as housing, the environment, the downtown and the vitality of the neighborhoods. The emphasis is on a proactive approach that allows for change to be woven into the character and identity of our traditional New England community. Whether offering protection to elements vulnerable to abrupt change, such as historic preservation, or advocating appropriate locations for development to occur, a proactive approach will look at both perspectives concurrently. Beyond zoning ordinances and mitigation initiatives, the Town may need to investigate additional tools and methods in order to effectively absorb growth in a benign and beneficial way.

## 4.3 GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

**Esthetic Preservation** 

Reading prides itself on its colonial heritage and substantial inventory of historic structures and places. The Historic Commission is a long-standing Town body that seeks to preserve the historical environment, which is under continual threat from small and large scale residential development and commercial redevelopment.

# Goal 1 Preserve the architectural heritage and the traditional village character of the Town.

## **Objectives:**

- A. Preserve the Town as a primarily single-family, owner-occupied residential community. Reach a consensus on the definition of Reading as a "bedroom community" in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century Boston Region.
- B. Protect the historical village pattern by the balance of its constituents: buildings, streets and natural elements. Promote this balance as a prerequisite for developments to a scale familiar and comfortable to the individual.
- C. Promote an orderly coherent public realm for the Town through gateways, historic preservation, sign control, open-space preservation, and beautification programs.

**Growth Management** 

Reading has experienced large scale development and redevelopment in recent years that was uncommon to its landscape in previous generations. Notably, the residential environment over the past 20 or so years has seen the introduction of large, multi-family structures in large tracts of open space and farmland, which were previously home to single family subdivisions. These more intensive uses have created strains on the natural and built environments in less centralized areas where inadequate infrastructure exists at a time when housing prices were escalating.

# Goal 2 Manage Growth in size, location, land-use selection & infrastructure impacts.

## **Objectives:**

- A. Respect the limits to growth imposed by the natural environment and by the existing and feasible extent of infrastructure.
- B. Manage affordable housing policies so that affordable units are evenly distributed in the neighborhoods.
- C. Promote diversity as a strengthening civic bond in the daily interaction of residents. and continuity of residence as a prerequisite for the community's motivation and volunteerism.
- D. Promote the design of new construction to seamlessly connect with their receiving surroundings.
- E. Encourage infill development and create incentives to intensify developments adjacent to the Depot. Encourage the adaptive re-use of buildings wherever feasible.

### Education

Reading's educational system continues to be a valued resource for the Town's existing families, but the very qualities of the school system that appeal to current residents are attracting an influx of families from around the region, thereby challenging the maintenance of its assets.

# Goal 3 Preserve the School System in resources, infrastructure & scholastic achievement as a social function of high importance.

### **Objectives:**

- A. Prioritize the development and modernization of aging building stock so that students experience a contemporary school environment.
- B. Assist the School Committee in assessing the short- and long-term needs in facilities and personnel.
- C. Create a network of pathways, bike routes and sidewalks around schools and encourage students to use them.
- D. Strengthen the bond between schools and extra-curriculum activities run by the Town and other Organizations.